

Daily News (Bowling Green, KY)

WKU considers slimmer degree programs Change would mean some students could graduate with bachelor's by completing just 120 credit hours

JOANIE BAKER, The Daily News, jbaker@bgdailynews.com

Published: October 5, 2008

Officials at Western Kentucky University are considering reducing the number of credit hours required to graduate to 120 – but most students wouldn't feel the change.

Most study programs at the school require 128 credits toward a bachelor's degree, but Provost Barbara Burch pointed out that most students end up taking more hours because of "exploration" or changing majors.

Yet a committee has been formed to review possible changes, intended to help focused students finish their degree programs a bit more quickly. The review follows suggestions from the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education to reduce the credit hours to a minimum, possibly boosting students' momentum to graduate, Burch said.

Burch said all public universities in the state are considering the change, but stressed that nothing will be done to compromise the quality or accreditation of the university's programs.

"I think even if we do reduce to 120, I'm not personally confident it will produce significant reductions in the number of hours students take," she said. "When students come to Western, they may not know for sure what they want to do."

Burch said more than half the students who come to Western change their majors or take additional classes outside of their field – a move that is not necessarily a bad one, she said.

"It creates an opportunity for students to explore and expose them to things to make a wise decision to find their passion," she said.

A program is already in place at Western that guarantees students will finish their degree in four years, as long as they sign a contract and follow the degree program verbatim. The guarantee, offered since 2006, provides students with special advisors, priority registration and mandatory entrance into classes. If, after four years, the student needs any more credit, the agreement says the school will pay for the additional courses.

Very few students take advantage of that program, Burch said, but added she supports any change that could help streamline the process for students who know what they want to do, as long as it doesn't compromise their educational experience.

"We are really being conscientious and looking at it and trying to do what is right," Burch said. "We will not sacrifice the quality of programs in order to shoehorn programs into fewer hours to meet the 120 hours."

In fact, while a majority of programs could accommodate the change, some never could, according to Doug McElroy, assistant vice president of academic affairs and chairman of the exploration committee. Programs such as nursing, engineering and music already require more than 128 credit hours, and those aren't going to be reduced.

"It's important to be clear that if we decide to make such a move, we certainly are not going to do anything to sacrifice the integrity of the degree programs or encourage students to take fewer courses they might like," he said. "But we also recognize certain students that for financial, personal or professional reasons, have to optimize their time."

The committee is also reviewing other issues that may be effected by the change, McElroy said, such as financial aid and state-provided scholarship dollars. Registrar Freida Eggleton said even dining services could see an impact if students do not stay on campus for as many years.

McElroy said the committee, which will meet again Monday before presenting its findings to Burch in late October, is in the early information gathering phase.

Officials said they have yet to encounter any real negatives to making the change, except perhaps some “procedural issues” they’d “have to work through,” McElroy said.

“My biggest fear is the frightening thing that if we declare a 120-hour minimum and it caused the public at large or legislators to think that all students should have to finish in that few hours,” Burch said.